

U.S. Department of Homeland Security

SEP - 2 2003

The Honorable John Conyers
Committee on the Judiciary
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congressman Frank:

Thank you for your letter co-signed by four other Members of Congress, regarding the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP). Identical letters will be sent to each of the signatories.

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) appreciates and comprehensively monitors all internally and externally generated issues and concerns regarding the SEVP and its database and the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS). The DHS continues to meet and work with many stakeholder groups and individuals regarding their concerns and SEVP and SEVIS. In response to your request for a moratorium on the requirement and use of SEVIS, the final DHS/SEVP regulation published December 11, 2002 (67 FR 76256), clearly requires the retention and reporting of information on F, J, and M non-immigrant students via SEVIS, and that all continuing foreign students be entered into SEVIS no later than August 1, 2003. However, the DHS is fully cognizant of the issues cited in your letter and fully aware of the significance of the August 1, 2003, SEVIS deadline and its potential impact on the schools and students associated with the SEVP. The DHS will continue to monitor the school certification progress very closely, as well as the submission of I-20 applications for foreign students.

The SEVIS is an Internet-based system that maintains accurate and current information on non-immigrant students (F and M visa) and exchange visitors (J visa), and their dependents. The SEVIS enables schools and program sponsors to transmit electronic information (Forms I-20 and S-2019) and event notifications, via the Internet, to the DHS and Department of State throughout a student's or exchange visitor's stay in the United States (U.S.). The SEVIS is also able to collect information and maintain the certification of educational institutions. This system is a critical, evolving tool for ensuring the security of our country, its citizens and foreign students. In order to be effective, SEVIS implementation and execution requires the full partnership of the DHS, colleges, universities, exchange programs, and all organizations and individuals participating in the education of foreign students in the United States. Foreign student and exchange visitor programs serve and promote U.S. foreign policy objectives by exposing nationals of other countries to the institutions and culture of the United States. This cultural exchange helps cement alliances with other countries by the transfer and sharing of knowledge and skills.

As with the implementation of any new database system of this scope and scale, there is always an initial period where the user may experience performance inefficiencies or process irregularities. The SEVIS is not an exception. An initial performance problem with the SEVIS application caused an overload to the processor housing the SEVIS database, during a particularly busy usage period. Since January 2003, the system has been upgraded several times to eliminate this anomaly, and the system has not experienced any more problems in this area. However, we continue to monitor the system closely and obtain essential feedback from the users in the educational community. This includes input from our dedicated SEVIS national help desk, separate from the main DHS or Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services/Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement call center to evaluate ways to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the system and ensure the best level of customer service we can provide.

The DHS continues to meet and work with many stakeholder groups regarding their specific concerns about SEVP and SEVIS. We are aware of the importance of the overall program to the security of this country and the need to certify all applicable schools as soon as possible in order to facilitate user access to the system. The DHS continues to disseminate information on the SEVP to the educational community via a variety of conduits, to ensure that everyone receives the information in a timely manner. Current information on all aspects of SEVIS and SEVP is also maintained on our Web site. The exact Web site address is <http://www.immigration.gov/graphics/shared/sevis/index.htm>.

I appreciate your interest in the Department of Homeland Security and we look forward to working with you on future homeland security issues. If we may be of further assistance, please contact the Office of Legislative Affairs at (202) 205-4412.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Pamela J. Turner".

Pamela J. Turner
Assistant Secretary for Legislative Affairs